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Viewing cable 06SOFIA716, NUCLEAR POWER INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS BULGARIA'S

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06SOFIA716	2006-05-19 13:25	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bivol.bg/wikileaks/item/802-wikileaks-kozlodui-incident.html>

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VZCZCXRO0849
RR RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSF #0716/01 1391325
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 191325Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1944
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000716

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/18/2026
TAGS: [ENRG](#) [TRGY](#) [EUN](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [IAEA](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: NUCLEAR POWER INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS BULGARIA'S
PRE-ACCESSION JITTERS

Classified By: A/DCM Brad Freden for reason 1.4 (b) & (c).

1.(C) Summary: A recent incident at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant has demonstrated the reluctance of Bulgarian authorities to be fully transparent about safety problems concerning their aging nuclear reactor. Authorities on March 1 discovered that a number of control rods used to shut down the reactor in an emergency situation were inoperable during a reduction of power at the reactor. Even though the IAEA characterized the incident as a relatively minor one, the Bulgarian government remained tight-lipped about what exactly had happened at the plant. It was only after a German newspaper article speculated that Bulgaria had had a near-Chernobyl accident that Bulgarian officials were compelled to explain what had occurred. The GOB's behavior undoubtedly reflects its anxiety over EU accession and angst over having to shut down Kozloduy Units 1 through 4 as part of its membership bid. It also underscores the work still to be done on creating a culture of greater official transparency. End Summary.

2.(C) On March 1 a short circuit caused one of the cooling pumps at Kozloduy's Unit 5 reactor to fail. As part of the plant's emergency protection system, power in the reactor was immediately decreased to 67 percent with the aid of the system's control rods. Soon after the reactor was powered down, the plant's managers discovered that a number of the control rods had failed to drop into the proper position to slow or stop the nuclear reaction. Further investigation revealed that 22 of the 61 rods were failing to engage. The plant managers eventually decided to completely shut down the reactor to further analyze the problem. They later learned that the failure of the control rods was due to "sticking" between the rods and their drive mechanism. However, once the rods were physically moved or activated, they appeared to function fine. To prevent further sticking until a permanent solution could be found, the plant instituted a short-term corrective measure of moving the rods every day for the first week after the event and then once a week until the end of the current fuel cycle in June. Authorities now are working with the reactor's Russian designer, Gidropress, and the Institute of Metal Science at the Bulgarian Academy of Science to determine the precise cause of the sticking and develop a long-term solution to the problem.

3. (C) Sergey Tzotchev, the chairman of Bulgaria's Nuclear Regulatory Agency (NRA), told us that Bulgarian authorities had explained the incident to the IAEA at the biannual meeting of INES (International Nuclear Event Scale) national officers in Vienna May 2-5. The IAEA agreed with the plant's initial decision to categorize the event as a Level 1 event (Level 7 being the most dangerous). The NRA later recommended the event be characterized as Level 2 (i.e., an "incident" rather than an "anomaly"), according to the INES scale, because the incident revealed that more than one element had failed to react and there had been faults in related procedures. The IAEA concurred with this and agreed with Bulgarian officials that the population was never in any danger.

4. (C) Tzotchev and his staff reassured us that if there had been an emergency and the reactor needed to be shut down immediately, the 39 remaining rods would have been sufficient to perform this action. However, whether they could have engaged these 39 rods as quickly as necessary (in a second or two) is not clear. If the incident--and the problems of the control rods sticking--had occurred a few months later, it is quite possible that more rods would have failed and the reactor would not have been able to be shut down quickly in an emergency. This concern was expressed to us by XXXXXXXXXXXX. According to him, the event at Kozloduy was the first time a nuclear reactor had experienced this type of problem. He said the event represents a clear decline in the margin of safety at the plant. He also said that the decision by the plant's managers to leave the reactor functioning for six hours after discovering the problem was a clear violation of safety guidelines.

GOVERNMENT EVADES FULL DISCLOSURE OF INCIDENT

5. (C) More troubling, however, is how the Bulgarian authorities handled the incident by failing to come clean

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publicly. From the outset, Bulgarian officials stayed quiet about anything out of the ordinary occurring at the plant. Initial press reports on March 2 or 3 indicated the reactor had to be shut down because of electrical problems that had caused one of the cooling pumps to automatically be switched off. The authorities never acknowledged a problem with the control rods or provided specific details or explanations of what had happened. The NRA told us the agency had published a short press release on its website summarizing the incident two weeks after it occurred. The media, however, was never informed about the press release, which went unnoticed. The issue--apparently a routine shutdown--disappeared completely from the local press until the German newspaper Der Spiegel published an article in late April quoting the former head of the NRA, Georgi Kaschiev, who alleged a serious accident at Kozloduy had occurred and the government was intentionally trying to cover it up. We heard about the incident and the problems with the rods a week before the Der Spiegel article from an Embassy contact involved in the energy field. He alleged that the manager of the plant had been told to keep the incident quiet or risk being "knocked off."

6. (C) Even after the article prompted the Bulgarian press to

probe the authorities for more information, the GOB remained defensive. Minister for Economy and Energy, Rumen Ovcharov, told the press on April 25 that "nothing out of the ordinary" had happened, and speculation surrounding the incident was the work of people who have done "everything they could to discredit Bulgaria's energy sector and the country as a whole." Ovcharov refused to respond to Kaschiev's specific allegations, saying Bulgarian's nuclear power sector should not be held hostage to "personal conflicts." It was clear, however, that other politicians were not pleased about being caught flat-footed. When asked by journalists about the incident at Kozloduy, the Speaker of Parliament, Georgi Pirinski, responded that he had only learned about the event from the media. Pirinski added that he believed the government had reacted appropriately, but certain questions needed to be answered, like why the public was not informed of the incident in a timely manner.

EU NERVOUSNESS A KEY FACTOR IN LACK OF NUCLEAR TRANSPARENCY

17. (C) Bulgaria's last-minute jitteriness over its EU accession bid seems clearly to be behind authorities' reluctance to be fully open about safety concerns related to Kozloduy. Ovcharov himself admitted that this was "the worst possible time" to be spreading "rumors" about faults in the plant. Many government officials, as well as the public, are still smarting over Bulgaria's agreement to close down Kozloduy Units 1 through 4 as a condition for its EU membership. Officials still claim that most nuclear experts would agree that Kozloduy 3 and 4 are now safe following recent upgrades, and that the EU is being overly cautious at Bulgaria's expense. Ovcharov commented in March that Bulgaria is the only country that "will have to pay a high price for EU membership before its accession" due to the reactors' closure. Recent reports that energy prices may climb as a result of the loss of 3 and 4 have renewed calls by some critics to hold a national referendum on the units' closure. Any indication that Unit 5, which is to remain operational, is unsafe would seriously undermine the assertion of many officials that the forced closure of Units 3 and 4 is unjust, and could begin sowing doubts in Brussels about the safety of Units 5 and 6. Moreover, the Bulgarian government, already concerned about a possible delay in its accession bid, probably fears giving Brussels one more reason to put off its EU membership.

Beyrle